

CULTURAL GUIDE TO THAILAND

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INTRODUCTION

Bangkok, known in Thai as the “City of Angels,” has changed from a quiet fishing village to one of Southeast Asia’s major centers of trade and commerce, and is now the home of an estimated 10 million people.

Home to the U.S. Embassy to the Kingdom of Thailand, Bangkok is a city of contrasts between modernity and tradition. Luxury high-rise apartment buildings side up to ancient temples; modern department stores shared quarters with crowded outdoor markets filled with tiny stalls; wide, busy avenues intersect with narrow, crooked lanes and canals; and food vendors cook on sidewalks near gourmet restaurants. A lifetime could be spent exploring Bangkok and its mix of cultures, customs, and people.

Though urban Thailand has many Western characteristics, there are many aspects of the Thai culture and belief system that are different from that of the United States. This is still true for Bangkok and is most certainly true for smaller cities and rural areas in Thailand.

There are currently more than 30 U.S. Government agencies and offices represented in the U.S. Mission in Bangkok, making it one of the largest missions in the world. Included among the agencies are the State Department, the Centers for Disease Control (CDC), Customs Service (USCS), Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA), Federal Aviation Administration (FAA)/Transportation Security Administration (TSA), Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), Foreign Agricultural Service (FAS), Foreign Commercial Service (FCS), Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS)/Department of Homeland Security (DHS), Peace Corps, Secret Service (USSS), and International Broadcasting Bureau (IBB). In addition, the Department of Defense is represented by the Defense Attaché Office (DAO), Joint U.S. Military Advisory Group – Thailand (JUSMAG-THAI), Joint Task Force – Full Accounting (JFT/FA), Armed Forces Research Institute of Medical Sciences (AFRIMS), United States Agency for International Development (USAID), and Company C of the Marine Security Guard Battalion.

The Embassy also serves as a regional base for several specialized State Department offices serving Foreign Service posts in the region. These include the Bangkok Regional Diplomatic Courier Office (BRDCO), Financial Services Center (FSC), Regional Information Management Center (RIMC), Regional Medical Office (RMO) and Regional Human Resources Office (RHRO).

Beyond the traditional role the Embassy plays in the conduct of foreign affairs, the protection of American citizens and the promotion of U.S. business, various elements of the Mission work closely with the Royal Thai Government in areas such as drug eradication and enforcement, refugee screening and processing, research to control the spread of AIDS, investigations of counterfeit U.S. currency and documents, and maintenance of international standards of airport security.

The Consulate is located in the northern city of Chiang Mai about 500 miles north of Bangkok. The Chiang Mai consular district encompasses Thailand's 15 northernmost provinces and is surrounded by the mountainous borders of Burma on the north and west, and Laos on the north and east. The Consulate General consists of several agencies, including State Department, DEA, CDC and U.S. Air Force. The DEA has offices in a separate facility several miles from the Consulate General, and an Air Force Detachment works at a seismic monitoring facility west of the city.

GENERAL BACKGROUND

Geography

The Kingdom of Thailand is located at a strategic crossroads in Southeast Asia. It adjoins Burma (Myanmar) on the west and north, landlocked Laos on the northeast, Cambodia on the east, and Malaysia and the Gulf of Thailand on the south. With an area of over 200,000 square miles, Thailand is about the size of the State of Texas and is the second largest nation in Southeast Asia.

Topographically, Thailand presents a varied landscape of forested mountains, dry plateaus, fertile river plains, and sandy beaches. Mountain ranges extend along the border with Burma and down to Malaysia. Another range splits the country in half from north to south. The kingdom is divided into four regions: the central plains of the Chao Phraya River delta, the mountains of the North, the dry plateau of the Northeast (*Isaan*), and the South. In addition to the geographic differences of the regions, the cultures and dialects are distinct as well.

The Chao Phraya River originates in the north of Thailand and flows southward to empty into the Gulf of Thailand south of Bangkok. It irrigates the fertile rice fields of the Central Plains through a network of "klongs" or canals. This long river historically served as the main water transportation route through the central region.

Located at 20 degrees north latitude, Thailand is generally hot and humid with a tropical monsoon climate. A pronounced rainy season lasts from July to October. From November to February, the northeast monsoon brings a cooler, drier period, when humidity drops from an average high of 95 percent to an average low of 58 percent. During this season, temperatures typically range from the mid-60s in the early morning to the mid-80s during the day. The period from March to June is Bangkok's summer, which is usually hot and humid; temperatures can reach 100 degrees Fahrenheit.

History

Southeast Asia has been inhabited for more than a half million years. Studies suggest that by 4000 B.C., communities in what is now Thailand had emerged as centers of early bronze metalworking. This development, along with the cultivation of rice, provided the impetus for social and political organization. Research suggests that these innovations may actually have been spread from there to the rest of Asia, including China. The Thai

are linguistically related to groups originating in southern China, from where they may have migrated to Southeast Asia in the 6th and 7th centuries. Malay, Mon, and Khmer civilizations flourished in the region prior to the arrival of the ethnic Thai.

Thais date the founding of the kingdom to the 13th century, when in 1238, the Thai overthrew the Khmer and established a Thai kingdom with its capital at Sukhothai. After its decline, a new Thai kingdom emerged in 1350 on the Chao Praya River at Ayutthaya. The first ruler of the Kingdom of Ayutthaya, King Rama Thibodi, made important contributions to Thai history: the establishment and promotion of Theravada Buddhism as the official religion in order to differentiate his kingdom from the neighboring Hindu kingdom of Angkor and the compilation of the Dharmashastra, a legal code based on Hindu sources and traditional Thai custom, which remained a tool of Thai law until late in the 19th century.

In 1767, after more than 400 years of power, invading Burmese armies brought down the Kingdom of Ayutthaya and the capital was burned. King Taksin established the new capital on the Chao Phraya River at Thonburi. Fifteen years later, this capital was relocated across the river to the present-day site of Bangkok during the reign of the next king. This king, Rama I, was the first king of the current Chakri dynasty. The kingdom became Siam, as it was called until 1938 when the name was changed to Thailand, "Land of the Free."

Rama's heirs became increasingly concerned with the threat of European colonialism after British victories in neighboring Burma in 1826. Beginning with the Portuguese in the 16th century, Ayutthaya had some contact with the West, but until the 1800s its relations with neighboring nations, India, and China, were of primary importance. The first recognition of Western power by Siam was the Treaty of Amity and Commerce with the United Kingdom in 1826. In 1833, the United States began diplomatic exchanges with Siam. During the later reigns of King Mongkut (Rama IV, 1851-1868), and his son King Chulalongkorn (Rama V, 1868-1910), Siam established firm rapprochement with Western powers. The Thais believe that the diplomatic skills of these monarchs, combined with the modernizing reforms of the Thai government, made Siam the only country in South and Southeast Asia to avoid European colonization.

In 1932, a bloodless coup transformed the Government of Thailand from an absolute to a constitutional monarchy. King Prajadhipok (Rama VII) initially accepted this change but later surrendered the kingship to his 10-year old nephew, King Ananda Mahidol (Rama VIII). His Majesty Bhumibol Adulyadej (Rama IX), the ninth king of the Chakri dynasty and the reigning king, ascended the throne in 1946 and is the longest-reigning king in Thai history. Although nominally a constitutional monarchy, Thailand was ruled by a series of military governments interspersed with brief periods of democracy from the 1932 coup until the 1992 elections. Since those elections, Thailand has been a functioning democracy with constitutional changes of government.

As with the rest of Southeast Asia, Thailand was occupied by the Japanese during the Second World War. Since Japan's defeat in 1945, Thailand has had close relations with

the United States. In the 1960s and 1970s, Thailand was an important base for U.S. military and intelligence activities in the region. Threatened by communist revolutions in neighboring countries such as Burma, Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos, Thailand actively sought to contain communist expansion in the region.

From 1985 to 1995, Thailand enjoyed the world's highest annual growth rate, but by 1997 increased speculative pressure on Thailand's currency led to a crisis that uncovered weaknesses in the financial sector. This forced the government to float the baht, and Thailand became the first country to fall victim to the Asian Economic Crisis. By 1999, Thailand's economy showed signs of recovery, and investment and consumption have been continually increasing since then.

Thailand's government continues to be highly centralized, although under the 1997 Constitution some powers will gradually be transferred to local authorities over time. The administrative structure is divided into four levels: province, district, sub-district, and village. Thailand's 76 provinces have governors who are appointed by the Ministry of Interior, with the exception of Bangkok, which has an elected governor. Villages elect headmen (the first women to occupy these positions were elected in 1982), and a leader for each sub-district (group of villages) is elected from among the village heads. Cities and larger towns have local municipal governments responsible for maintaining public safety and sanitation and for providing schools. The Minister of the Interior—through the provincial governors, district officers, and municipal inspectors—supervises all local government functions.

In the January 2001 elections, telecommunications multimillionaire Thaksin Shinawatra and his Thai Rak Thai (TRT) party won an overwhelming victory on a populist platform of economic growth and development. TRT enjoys an absolute majority in the lower house of the Parliament. In a cabinet reshuffle in October 2002, the Thaksin administration further put its stamp on the government. A package of bureaucratic reform legislation created six new ministries in an effort to streamline the bureaucratic process and increase efficiency and accountability.

More recently, Thailand has been an active member in the regional Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) and the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC), and was the host of the 2003 APEC Summit.

POPULATION

Thailand is a nation of around 63 million people. About one-third of all Thais live in urban areas and the urban population continues to grow because of in-migration of job seekers from rural areas. It is estimated that between 7 and 10 million people live in Bangkok, the seat of the Royal Thai Government and the location of the Embassy.

However, the majority of Thais live outside Bangkok in Thailand's smaller cities, villages, and rural areas. Most rural Thais are involved in agricultural activities, mostly

related to rice cultivation, fish, fruits, and rubber wood. There is a growing manufacturing sector in Bangkok and in Thailand's other cities.

After Bangkok, the most populous cities in Thailand are Nakhon Ratchasima or Khorat in the Northeast (437,000 people) and Chiang Mai, location of the Consulate, in the North (248,000). There are several cities with populations of 100,000 to 200,000 people. The city of Chiang Mai was the capital of a semiautonomous Northern Thai kingdom until the early 1900s, and is now an important regional center.

Density

Thailand's population is mostly rural, concentrated in the rice-growing areas of the central, northeastern, and northern regions. The Chao Phraya Delta of central Thailand is the most densely populated region and also tends to dominate economically and politically, though the vast northeastern plateau (*Isaan*) is the most populous region in the kingdom.

Ethnic Groups

Thailand's population is relatively homogeneous. More than 85 percent speak a dialect of Thai and share a common culture. This core Thai population is comprised of the central Thai of the Chao Phraya Delta (33.7%), the Thai-Lao of the Northeast (34.2%), the northern Thais (18.8%), and the Thai Pak Thai of southern Thailand (13.3%). The language of central Thai is the language taught in schools and used in government. Other Thai-speaking groups include the Shan, Lue, and Phutai.

The largest minorities are the Chinese—about 12% of the population, many who are now second or third generation Thai—and the Malay-speaking Muslims of the south (2.3%). Other groups include the Khmer; the Mon, who are substantially assimilated with the Thai; and the Vietnamese. Smaller, predominantly mountain-dwelling tribes, such as the Hmong, Karen, and Mien, number about 788,000.

Conflict Within Population

The four southernmost Thai provinces are predominantly Muslim. This area has experienced incidents of criminally and politically motivated violence, including incidents attributed to armed local separatist/extremist groups. These sporadic periods of unrest and violence have focused primarily on Thai government interests.

Remote areas along the Thai border with both Burma and Laos are sites of on-going conflicts between respective militaries, armed opposition groups, and security forces. In addition, bandits and drug traffickers operate in the Burmese border area. In light of the unsettled situation along the Thai-Burmese border, the border is subject to closings to all traffic.

COMMUNICATIONS

Languages

Thai is the official language of Thailand, and the central dialect and script are taught in school and used in government. Native Thai dialects differ in tonal accents and slight variations of vocabularies between regions and within regions, and especially vary from north to south.

Thai language distinguishes between “polite” and “informal” vocabulary. In situations when it is unclear what vocabulary to use, it is best to use the polite terms to avoid offense. Though not used as much as in the past, there is a complex set of pronouns that are used in various settings depending on the social situation. Even today, a different set of vocabulary is used when speaking to or referring to the king, the queen, or their children, and a different set yet for monks.

Thai is a tonal language and has five tones: low, level, high, falling, and rising. Thai script is rather complex: there are 21 separate consonant sounds produced from 44 consonants, and 48 vowel and diphthong possibilities that use 32 separate signs. Thai is read from left to right, top to bottom, and there are usually no spaces between words in a sentence. Thai script can be traced back to the south Indian Sanskrit scripts. There is no standard phonetic spelling of Thai so the same word written in western script may have several different spellings.

Common greeting forms

The *wai* is a nonverbal greeting and a sign of respect. This greeting is made by placing both hands together at chest level, palms touching, and fingers pointing up while bowing the head. The *wai* also symbolizes much about the Thai social system by being a display of status and rank. The social inferior will always take a physically inferior position by bending the head lower and raising the hands higher, which immediately identifies the person with the higher rank. The *wai* is also used for objects (Buddha images) and sacred places, and serves as a gesture of thanks.

The most common verbal greeting is *Sawaat dii*, which is used for both hello and goodbye. A general translation is a wish for comfort and happiness.

Use of titles, honorifics, and forms of address

Conversation at any level involves the use of names and titles. Thais use the term *Khun* for Mr., Mrs., or Miss, unless the person is of higher standing. Specific titles are used for politicians, members of the military, doctors, teachers, and other people in respected professions.

Even when speaking English, Thais will use the polite formula (*Khun*) with the first name. *Khun* and other titles are not only used when speaking to someone, but also when

talking about someone. Referring to someone using the first name does not imply that the speaker is friendly or familiar with the individual. Thais frequently have short, simple nicknames that are used instead of long first names that can be difficult for the *farang* (foreigner) to pronounce or remember. Though nicknames are commonly used, they are always preceded with *Khun*.

Non-Verbal

Accepted and non-accepted gestures

Thais are tolerant of most kinds of behavior as long as Buddhism and the monarchy are not insulted. Just as Buddhism is a sacred part of Thai life and culture, the royal family is also highly revered. To criticize, say, or imply wrongdoing of the king, the queen, or their children is extremely disrespectful. Though criticizing Thai government and culture is acceptable, disparaging remarks about the royal family can result in penalties including imprisonment. The act of a Thai insulting the monarchy is considered treason.

Thais and visitors are expected to stand when the national or royal anthem is played. The anthem is played daily at 8:00 a.m. and 6:00 p.m. on radio and television stations as well as over public loudspeakers in towns, villages, and a few Bangkok neighborhoods. Thais will stop and stand during the anthem. The royal anthem is played before films are shown in movie theaters, and the audience is expected to stand until it is over.

There are a number of physical gestures and actions that can be insulting to the Thai Buddhist values. The top of the head is precious and the foot is the lowliest and dirtiest part of the body. The bow of the head in the *wai* is symbolic because it is the lowering of the most sacred part of the body so that it is lower than that of the superior. As the head is the most important part of the body, it is insulting to touch someone on the top of the head. When reaching over someone's head or accidentally brushing the top of someone's head on a crowded train, you should quickly excuse yourself so that no offense is made. Likewise, standing over a Thai as they work at their desk or on a computer may make some people uncomfortable for similar reasons.

On the other hand, the foot is the dirtiest part of the body. Pointing with the foot is quite improper, and it is particularly insulting to use the foot to point at a person or sacred objects. Propping feet on a chair or desk is taboo. At royal palaces and major temples, do not expose the feet by wearing sandals, sitting with legs stretched out in front, or sitting with the legs crossed. When inside a temple, one should always sit with the feet and legs to the side, not with the legs crossed in front. Attempting to enter palace grounds in shorts or cropped pants will sometimes lead to denial of entry.

Shoes should be removed before entering a *wat* (a Buddhist temple) or a Thai person's home. You will often know when to remove your shoes by observing the actions of the Thais. Only if you are told not to remove your shoes should you wear them in your host's house. Some shop owners will also ask you to remove your shoes before entering. You will notice shoeless shopkeepers, maids, repairmen, deliverymen, painters, and others in Thailand.

As the height of the head is a determinant of status so is a person's place in a room. The front is reserved for superiors, and the back is meant for inferiors. At organized events, monks, the elderly, and other important people will sit in the front and remaining front seats will remain empty.

Stepping over someone is also offensive. Because there are many instances in which people sit on the floor, the occasion will likely arise. If there is not a clear path that avoids stepping over someone in a crowded room, excusing yourself by bending down as you pass will be appreciated.

Thais tend not to use the hands to point, gesture, or get someone's attention: the hands are not used in such an obvious manner. Pointing with the finger is not appropriate and the same purpose is better served by a verbal description or a discreet gesture. Rather than waving across a room to get someone's attention, it is best to call with a soft voice or to use a soft beckoning motion instead of clapping or shouting. In conversations, it is somewhat unusual for a Thai to use excited hand movements and gesturing. If a *farang* behaves this way, it may be misunderstood that the person is angry rather than excited.

Facial expressions

Thailand is known as the "Land of Smiles." The smile of the Thai has numerous meanings and are used for different purposes, and to the unknowing *farang*, the meaning may be misunderstood or misconstrued. In Thailand, smiles express amusement but are also used to excuse, to thank, to side-step, and to show embarrassment. Unlike Western cultures, in which the smile is predominantly used to express pleasure and amusement, the Thais smile when they are happy, embarrassed, gracious, in disagreement, apologetic, and angry or when they want to avoid confrontation or end discussion. If the *farang* is unfamiliar with this part of the Thai personality, misinterpreting a Thai smile can be confusing and misleading.

Physical space/contact

Monks and Nuns are highly respected in Thailand. Women, in particular, should make much effort to avoid touching monks, including their robes. Special attention should be paid on crowded buses, in markets, and sidewalks to avoid contact with the saffron-robed monks and white-robed nuns.

CULTURAL CONSIDERATIONS

Values

This section is a brief description of some of the distinct cultural characteristics and values of the Thai people. These descriptions are generalizations and are not without exception, in particular, when comparing urban and rural people. Urbanites tend to be

more liberal and Western than rural farmers or villagers. Characteristics considered very conservative in Bangkok may be practiced daily in rural agrarian areas.

Important personality traits

In general, perhaps the most pervasive of Thai cultural imperatives is the personal avoidance of social confrontation. One of the factors determining such behavior is Buddhist teaching, which places a positive religious value on the avoidance of emotional extremes, commitment, and confrontation.

To the American, confrontation and conflict are the norm. It is not only acceptable but also appropriate to speak bluntly and frankly. Criticism and argument in an overt and public context are not avoided. In Thai society, on the other hand, a positive value is given to avoiding confrontation and even the emotional expressions of anger and annoyance. While wanting to be sympathetic, compassionate, generous and kind toward others, there is, at the same time, a bias toward avoiding emotional extremes. Resolving conflicts usually takes the form of compromise, with an attempt to avoid the harsh emotional edges and emotional displays of direct confrontation.

The hierarchy in Thai society also minimizes frank discussion that would be expected in a Western business or academic setting. Hierarchy is greatly respected and the questioning of authority (employer, teacher, etc.) by an inferior (employee, student, etc.) is inappropriate because it crosses the vertical hierarchy of such institutions (office, school, etc.). *Farang* managers, teachers, and other leaders must understand Thai personality and behavior and find creative ways to discuss issues with Thais and to resolve problems.

Saving face is of great importance. Because criticizing a superior would make the superior lose face, an inferior will not outwardly criticize his superior in front of others, and more likely, not at all out of consideration. In the same respect, in an embarrassing situation, a Thai may help an embarrassed person save face by laughing and joking to lessen the blow or divert attention. Not only does the Thai not want to contribute to someone losing face, they want to help someone save face.

A way to quickly lose face, as is easy for *farangs* to do, is to raise your voice. Speaking with a loud voice is not the norm among Thais. Most will speak quietly and respectfully. Raising your voice is a sign of losing control and will result in "losing face," an embarrassing deed.

View of foreigners

The Thais are open to *farangs* and few have anti-*farang* attitudes. The stereotype of the "hot-headed," emotional American is mixed with an appreciation of Western friendliness and frankness. The *farang*, coming to Thailand with cultural baggage filled with concepts of equality and direct confrontation, expects Thai colleagues and subordinates to show less deference, more initiative, and to be more argumentative. The Thai employee or

associate, adapting to the cultural realities of the *farang* world comes to realize that *farang* colleagues are often expressive, and are not bothered by showing pleasure, friendliness, or annoyance openly.

The Thais have a tendency to accept rather than to challenge though they are generally willing to incorporate new attitudes and new patterns of behavior if they are perceived as pleasant, or it seems *sanuk*—fun. It could be proposed that the Thai personality has a built-in mechanism to resist change because there are relatively few aspects of other cultures that are more *sanuk* than their own.

Concept of privacy

One of the few times the Thai is frank is when social status is being established. Small talk can quickly move into direct questions about age, salary, profession, family, and other factors that determine a person's status. These questions are not considered impolite because they are part of the Thai social context, and it is not impolite to answer these questions vaguely, for example, "I make enough money to be comfortable," though this kind of answer can be interpreted as modesty and further questions may follow.

Another common question by Thais is *pai nai?*, which translates to "Where are you going?" This question is commonly asked when Thai friends or colleagues pass each other in the hall or on the street. Thais are not being intrusive by asking this question; they do not usually expect to be answered in great detail. In most instances *pai thura* (for business) or *pai thiaw* (for fun or pleasure) are adequate answers.

Concept of time

In Buddhist philosophy, there is an uncertainty and impermanence about the material world. In Thai society this translates into "*mai pen rai*" meaning "never mind," "it is nothing," "it doesn't matter," and "you're welcome." The idea of "*mai pen rai*" is reflected in almost every phase of life, from a missed appointment to arriving late to a business meeting.

The American seldom questions the fact that time should be planned and future events fit into some kind of schedule. To the American, Thai life may seem unplanned, unscheduled and spontaneous. This is more obvious in the rural areas of Thailand, but is also evident in the behavior of the urbanites: despite the Western influence on the running of business and government, "*mai pen rai*" prevails.

Generally, weekends are considered family time and the workweek does not spillover. Though weekend social events are well received by Thais, planning work-related functions on weekends should be avoided, especially if Thais are expected to attend.

The Thais use three calendars, the Gregorian (the same calendar used in the West), the Buddhist Era, and the lunar (used to set dates for religious ceremonies). The Gregorian calendar was introduced in 1899. Until 1941, however, New Year's Day was always

celebrated on the first day of April. The Thai New Year is celebrated in the Songkran festival in mid-April every year. The Buddhist Era (B.E.) is one year behind the Buddhist Era year in Burma, Sri Lanka, and India, and is 543 years ahead of the Gregorian calendar.

Humor

Sanuk, fun, is of great importance to the Thai and must be a part of any activity and part of life, including work. *Sanuk* adds playfulness to tasks that would otherwise be boring. If an activity is not fun, Thais will quickly lose interest.

RELIGION

Theravada Buddhism is the official religion of Thailand and is the religion of 90% to 95% of its people, though the government permits religious diversity and other major religions are represented. Thai Buddhism is practiced in conjunction with Brahmic rituals and animism, the worship of natural spirits. A small percentage of Thais and the majority of the Malays in the south (about 4 % of the total population), are followers of Islam. Half a percent of the population, mostly the missionized hill tribes and Vietnamese immigrants, are Christian, while the other half a percent are Confucianists, Taoists, Mahayana Buddhists, and Hindus.

The basic Buddhist teaching does not concern a divine or supernatural force, but rather *karma*, the sum and consequences of an individual's actions that determine his destiny. Buddhism postulates no absolute dogma, makes no absolute demands on the person, and in turn, engenders no religious discomfort or guilt when one does not conform, yet its teaching permeates Thai daily life. In everyday morality, the Buddha taught that man should not lie, steal, commit adultery, indulge in intoxicants or kill any living creature. While the final goal of the Buddhist is to obtain Nirvana, the immediate and practical concern of most ordinary individuals is to improve oneself.

Theravada Buddhism is the single, most pervasive factor determining behavioral patterns in Thai culture. The concept of merit or making merit is extremely important in Thai society. Deriving from the Buddhist concept of *karma*, or reincarnation, it is believed that, "Do good, receive good; do evil, receive evil." To improve one's *karma*, some form of merit-making is in order. This is a very personal concern reflecting the privilege and obligation of each individual toward himself rather than to a Divine or secular authority. Merit-making takes many forms, the highest of which is entering the priesthood itself. Feeding the monks each morning and generally supplying the priesthood with temporal necessities is an easily observed form of making merit.

Merit is accumulated also by showing compassion, and by being kind and generous to others. Spouses of successful businesspeople and high-ranking government officials are often involved in charity work, accumulating their own merit by helping the less fortunate. In fact, every charitable act is viewed as some form of merit-making and the

King continually provides examples of this in his support and promotion of the villagers living in the less-developed areas of the country.

Buddhist temples, known as *wats*, are the community centers and serve as playgrounds for children, school buildings, as well as the site of special festivals. Buddhist monks, who are highly respected, are often involved in traditional ceremonies from the day of an individual's birth until the funeral ceremony of cremation. Entering into monkhood is also considered a rite of passage for many Thai men, especially in rural areas. Men traditionally entered the monkhood before marriage, sometimes for as little as a few days or a few months. The family holds an extravagant ceremony before the ordination ceremony.

Relationship to animals and inanimate objects

Thai Buddhism is practiced in conjunction with Brahmic rituals and animism, the worship of natural spirits. Beliefs in spirits vary by region. In northern Thailand, spirits of deceased relatives may live in the homes of family members. These trusted spirits are given a high shelf on which to reside and frequent offerings of fresh flowers and drinks. Throughout central Thailand, spirits are not believed to live in the house but rather the land. The spirits in central Thailand live in spirit houses, usually shaped like miniature temples, which are constructed in a corner of the compound. Usually, the house is placed on a wooden or concrete post, low enough to make offerings but high enough to show respect.

In addition to the house and land spirits, the spirits of rice, water, trees, and wind, which are relatively predictable year to year, are respected. Charms are sometimes worn or carried by Thais to protect against other unpredictable or bad spirits, to protect against danger and misfortune, or to ensure love, luck, and power. Buddha pendants are commonly worn around the neck. Symbols are marked above doorways and in vehicles to protect from bad spirits and misfortune.

View of Human Life

A fatalistic view on life can be observed in many Thais. Whether it is driving styles, behavior on motorbikes, or the overall lack of many safety precautions, Thais do not fear death. Death is believed to have been predetermined and the consequences of death are determined by the goodness of one's acts while living. One's next life will reflect the goodness of the past life in terms of social status, wealth, health, and happiness.

At times, this behavior can be unnerving to Westerners. Traffic laws and speed limits are most often ignored. Defensive driving is crucial as drivers do whatever is necessary to drive fast and to avoid slowing down. Motorbikes weave in and out of vehicle and truck traffic on busy city streets and highways. From observations in Thailand, one would learn that motorcycles and pick-up trucks carry an infinite number of children and adults. The use of helmets, especially by children, is inconsistent and tends to be dangerously low outside of Bangkok. Children are rarely restrained in car seats, and are rather left to climb

and play in moving vehicles. More often than not, laborers use and wear minimal or substandard safety equipment. Because of all of this behavior, accidents are prone to cause severe injury or death.

SOCIAL CUSTOMS

People

There is a strong Buddhist element in the belief that social position is a function of *karma*, of one's accumulation of merit and demerit. Most Thais consider authority and hierarchy natural to the human situation and not in contradiction with their belief in individualism. Social situations are not perceived without distinction between superior and inferior positions. The poor and other people of low social status do not view such a social system as particularly unreasonable or severe. Most people seem to feel that those who have status and authority derive them to a certain extent from their moral and ethical excellence.

One of the most difficult Thai concepts for *farangs* to comprehend is the behavioral pattern defined as *krengjai*. *Krengjai* is a combination of deference and consideration. In Thai society, with its emphasis on social place as expressed in elder-younger, subordinate-superior, patron-client relationships, *krengjai* is most often an attitude displayed toward one higher in the scale of rank, social status, or age. It is diffidence, deference, and consideration merged with respect. It also includes proper and appropriate behavior. To the frank and direct *farang*, the tendency to show deference and avoid imposing upon someone often appears to indicate weakness, subservience, and a lack of initiative. However, *farangs* must understand this temperament when working in the Thai business world.

There are well-defined patterns of behavior required for both parties in the symbiotic relationships of patron-client, teacher-pupil, elder-younger, boss-employee. There are reciprocal duties that the superior must fulfill in exchange for the awe, deference, diffidence, and respect that one on the lower rung of the hierarchical ladder shows to those above. Benevolence must be shown to the inferior in the form of moral, and sometimes material, support; advice; protection; and, if applicable, interest in career advancement. Loyalty is maintained as long as the respective positions of power, status, and rank remain stable.

Thais, generally, are not impelled by the Calvinist work ethic of Western industrial society. Their responsibilities lie first with their family and friends. Their family, social, and religious obligations are paramount.

Family Relationships

For the Thais there is a life-long debit relationship to one's parents for having been born and brought up. He must constantly repay this debt through kind and generous behavior. One can never totally repay favors and support given. Thus, the child remains eternally

grateful and continually committed to his parents. Obligation to one's parents is a cultural and moral imperative in Thai society, and transferring such responsibility to impersonal institutions is inappropriate.

Household Help

It is customary for households to have domestic help in Thailand, part-time or full-time, live-in or live-out. Many *farangs* living in Thailand have no experience with household help so it can be an adjustment for the family. Depending on the size and needs of your household, you will need to decide what staff to hire: maid, nanny, cook, driver, and others. In many cases, staff members have multiple responsibilities. Speak with other people at the Embassy about their experiences with domestic help in Thailand and read in detail about expectations and work requirements. It is important to ask prospective employees about their skills and for references before you hire them. You will also need to tell them about your demands and expectations. Generally, *farangs*, especially childless individuals and couples, are much less demanding employers than Thai families, which makes working for a *farang* household a preferred job. Networking with the expat and Embassy community is one of the best ways to find domestic help.

Domestic staff such as maids, nannies, and drivers should be paid an annual bonus at the New Year, at Songkran in April, or after the staff has worked for a year. This bonus is usually equivalent to a month's salary. If desired, it is acceptable to give staff small gifts at Christmas/New Year and when returning from leave. If having houseguests, compensate staff for the extra work. Guests may also leave a small gratuity, if so inclined.

BEHAVIOR

Honesty

Though areas frequented by tourists, such as the Grand Palace, are laden with hawkers, tour guides, and tuk-tuk drivers determined to scam tourists out of money, dishonesty is not a rampant problem in Thai society.

A *farang* is more likely to encounter excessive flattery and exaggeration on a daily basis rather than scams. This can lead to inflated egos regarding the *farang's* Thai-speaking ability, style of dress, and other often complemented topics. Thais are sometimes less inclined to directly answer a question or would rather give an expected answer than a truthful one. This approach can lead to frustration, yet the *farang* should be level-headed and persistent until confident that a truthful and direct answer is given.

Status/Caste

The acute sense of hierarchy pervading all personal relationships generates a system of status and rank that deeply affects the American and the American family living and working in Thailand. Every Thai knows exactly his or her status or rank. It is quite

obvious that the King and the *Sangka* (priesthood) are at the top of the system, followed by other members of the Royal Family and top military and government officials. Less obvious factors affecting rank include age, money, education, contributions to society, and achievement in the arts, sports, etc. In family relationships, age is the most important determining status.

Thai attention to rank can be observed anytime two Thais greet each other with the *wai*. The *wai* gesture immediately indicates which person has higher rank. The higher the hands are held and the lower the head is bowed, the more respect is shown by the inferior.

Among household help and other employees, rank is correlated with the employer's rank. At the embassy, for example, the Ambassador's driver is also the highest-ranking driver. However uncomfortable this may be to Americans, while in Thailand we each have some kind of rank in relation to our work or that of our spouse. Some familiarity with the various forms of address enables Americans to show sensitivity to this system of status and rank.

SOCIAL OCCASIONS AND ENTERTAINMENT

Food and Drink

Food is the center of many social activities with the Thai people. As a newcomer to Thailand you will notice the countless number of sidewalk food stands, food vendors, and open-air restaurants in Bangkok and every Thai city or village. Besides the informal breakfast, lunch, dinner, or snack that is bought from these sources, there are almost always food courts at every grocery store, shopping mall, and office building.

In Bangkok, sit-down restaurants are never hard to find, ranging from inexpensive to expensive. Middle-class and wealthy Thais frequently dine at high quality international restaurants at the top hotels. Restaurants are popular places for social events and are typically the destination of choice for entertaining friends and family, for business meetings, and other special occasions. Except for close friends and family, Thais are likely to invite friends or associates to dinner at a restaurant rather than their home. When a Thai invites guests to a restaurant, the inviter is expected to pay, unless a superior is present, in which case the superior pays. When a Thai is celebrating a birthday or special occasion, the celebrant is expected to pay. Though splitting the bill is becoming more common, it can be offensive to suggest doing so if not among friends. In the younger generations, this tradition is changing.

Nightclubs and bars are plentiful in Bangkok and even smaller Thai towns. These nightspots range from informal open-air restaurants with beer, whiskey, and food, to sports bars showing rugby and football (soccer to Americans) on large screens, to smoky snooker clubs or pool halls, to sophisticated entertainment venues and posh dance clubs with popular international DJs and very expensive mixed drinks. In some bars and clubs, it is typical that one person in a group of Thai friends purchases a bottle of whiskey to

share with the group throughout the evening. Some places have cover charges that include a bottle of whiskey and will even store the partially consumed bottle until the customer returns another night.

Dress

Generally, Thais dress conservatively when compared to many modern Western societies. Many businesses such as banks and insurance companies still require their employees to wear uniforms to work. Students are also required to wear uniforms, from their first day of school through their first couple years at university. Women's clothing tends not to be less revealing than Western countries. Thais, especially the younger generations, are style-conscious and fashionable. Western styles and designers are the norm. In Bangkok and other urban areas of Thailand, Western dress is typical.

The business dress of Thais is formal: suits for men and equivalent dress for women. The hot and humid climate of Bangkok does not influence the business dress of the Thais, and if working in an office with Thai colleagues, the same can be true of *farang* businesspeople and officials.

Formal events are truly formal, and should be considered as such. Over-dressing is a better choice than under-dressing for the occasion. For formal social or business occasions, a suit is expected dress for men. However, at some events, especially outside Bangkok, Thai men may wear the traditional Thai silk shirt. Formal Thai silk dresses and suits are standard outfits for Thai women, though formal Western evening wear may be commonplace depending on the type of event. Acceptable dress becomes more conservative in presence of the royal family, in which case women should wear skirts or dresses at or below knee-level instead of pants or slacks. Legs and shoulders should not be bare.

Invitations and Regrets

To most Americans it is an offense to accept an invitation and then not appear. However, in cultural terms, the Thai would prefer to avoid offending by abruptly refusing an invitation graciously extended and would not consider not appearing at the function unusual. The American prefers to be told in direct face-to-face contact if someone disagrees or is hurt or offended by one's behavior. To the Thais such confrontation, even when as simple as an invitation, is socially unacceptable, emotionally uncomfortable, and to be avoided.

When invited to a Thai friend or colleague's home—an invitation that should not be taken lightly—it is appropriate to bring a small gift of wine, liquor, or special food for your host. The sharing of such gifts is typical.

A *farang* manager, superior, or professional colleague is expected to attend wedding ceremonies and other special occasions for associates and employees when invited. For some, these events may occur quite frequently. For etiquette regarding gift giving, attire,

and other matters that may arise at the event, it is advisable to speak with a trusted Thai colleague.

HOLIDAYS AND CELEBRATIONS

The reigning King and Queen's birthdays, important days for the reigning and past monarchs, and important government and Buddhist holy days make up most of the Thai holidays. The King's birthday, December 5, also functions as Father's Day. The Queen's birthday, August 12, serves as Mother's Day. Thais celebrate the January 1 New Year's holiday and, in recent years, have begun celebrating Christmas. Fun and celebration is crucial for the happiness of many Thai people. Celebrating holidays comes naturally.

At the beginning of the Chinese lunar year (ranging from late January to early March depending on the year), there are great celebrations of the Chinese New Year throughout Thailand. Because of the Chinese heritage of many Thais, it is most celebrated in Bangkok and the Chinese-dominated provincial capital of Nakhon Sawan.

Over three days in mid-April, Songkran is the celebration of the lunar new year. Buddha images are bathed at *wats* and shrines. Younger Thais honor monks and elders by sprinkling water over their hands. In the streets of Bangkok and Chiang Mai, buckets of water are poured on friends and strangers in the streets. In the midst of the hot and dry season, this is seen as a relief to some and as an annoyance to others.

Loi Krathong is celebrated over several days in November. On the proper full-moon night, small lotus-shaped baskets or boats made out of banana leaves containing flowers, incense, candles, and a coin are floated on Thai rivers, lakes, and canals. Loi Krathong is most celebrated in the North, in particular Chiang Mai and Sukhothai. In Chiang Mai, residents also launch flaming paper hot-air balloons into the sky.

ART, THEATERS, AND CINEMA

The arts are accessible in Bangkok and Chiang Mai. Museums and historical attractions are increasingly English-friendly. In Bangkok, there are few art museums, though there are numerous art galleries and other collections. Even if museums are primarily historical or cultural in scope, there will often be a rotating or traveling exhibit of some type on display.

Bangkok and large Thai cities have live theater. In Bangkok and Chiang Mai, there may be some offerings in English. In Bangkok, musical and theater groups and international schools stage musicals and dramatic works. Touring theater, opera companies, and orchestral groups have performances in Bangkok, as well as organizations based in Bangkok.

Western and Asian films are popular in Thailand. In Bangkok, the Western films are most often subtitled in Thai, but outside of Bangkok films may be dubbed in Thai instead of shown with English subtitles. Outside of Bangkok and large cities, it may be difficult to

find English subtitles for Asian films. Bangkok movie theaters are quite plush when compared to theaters in the United States. Basic theaters are relatively cheap (two to three dollars a ticket), though ticket prices increase for luxury theaters with in-theater drink service, recliners, and sofas. Individual screening rooms can also be rented for parties or groups.

SPORTS AND FACILITIES

There are numerous opportunities for sports activities in Bangkok. Golf is popular throughout Thailand, and courses can be found in Bangkok and much of the kingdom. Thai boxing and horseracing are popular spectator sports. Tennis is popular in Bangkok, and courts are often available for rent at large hotels and sports clubs. Members of the Embassy community may use the gym at JUSMAG, their apartment building (if equipped), or can pay for memberships at fitness clubs. Many apartment buildings have swimming pools, though they may be geared for children or relaxation. Opportunities for bicycling and hiking are best in the fresh air of Thailand's national parks, though urban options do exist, including bike paths on the outskirts of Bangkok. Lumpini Park near the Embassy has jogging trails. Touring rural Thailand by bicycle is becoming popular, though cyclists should be aware of the dangers of traveling on roads with traffic and should carry spare parts.

Outdoor Facilities

The Kingdom of Thailand has more than 120 national parks covering all parts of the countryside. The Royal Forest Department maintains Thailand's parks, reserves, and wildlife sanctuaries. Facilities and accommodations available at each park vary, though some parks are quite well equipped with restrooms, cabins, camping areas, gravel trails, and food vendors.

Thailand is famous for its beaches and islands, some of which are within driving distance of Bangkok and many others can be reached by short flights from Bangkok. The beaches and islands continue to be developed, and there are usually accommodations located conveniently to popular attractions. Some coastal areas are located within the Forest Department's network of parks and sanctuaries.

DAILY LIFE

Virtually all modern conveniences are available in Bangkok. Though it is not always easy to find what you would imagine to be a common product, goods are usually available somewhere. Purchasing goods on the internet or through catalogues can be a simple way to find specific items that are hard to locate.

In past decades, bribery was widespread in many offices. Today, the prevalence of bribery with law enforcement and government officials has declined, and though bribery can still be seen in some situations, it is not rampant.

SHOPPING

The shopping possibilities in Thailand are endless. World-renowned Thai handicrafts, textiles, jewelry, and furniture are sold in Bangkok as well as the villages and provinces where they are produced. The government-sponsored One Tambon-One Product program encourages communities (*tambon*) to produce quality goods and crafts for sale domestically and internationally. In Bangkok, Thai craft sales and other exhibits are held frequently throughout the year.

Imported electronics, clothing, accessories, food products, and other items are easily found in Bangkok. Depending on the merchandise, the prices can be substantially higher than the same goods in the United States (specifically, designer clothing, shoes, and handbags as well as some wine, hardback books, and packaged foods). Bangkok department stores such as Central, Robinson, Isetan, Zen, and Emporium offer a wide range of merchandise including clothing, electronics, and housewares. These stores often house grocery stores as well.

The Embassy commissary, known as the Emporium, is an employee cooperative and has a membership fee. The size of a small U.S. supermarket, it is conveniently located on the Embassy grounds. The store sells an assortment of American food, household, and healthcare products. The selection of fresh produce such as fruits and vegetables is limited, though pesticide-free vegetables are stocked. Also, stocks cards, wrapping paper, magazines, and Embassy gift items are sold. The store is located on the annex compound, near the gas station, dry cleaner, frame shop, and the APO postal service.

Taxi drivers, tuk-tuk drivers, and friendly strangers offering to take tourists shopping are often looking for commissions at the shops they visit. This increases the selling price to the customer and the tourists are not taken to very reputable shops. Be wary of recommendations from these sources.

Bargaining

Bargaining is expected at markets and some shops. Bargaining can substantially lower the price, especially when purchasing more expensive merchandise such as furniture. Bargaining for larger purchases is not usually a quick process, but well worth the time. In many cases, you have more bargaining power if purchasing more than one item. The more you buy, the more leverage you have with the price. Department and grocery stores have set prices, but have frequent sales and promotions.

Bangkok has many shopping markets. Merchandise varies and includes clothing, hardware, plants and flowers, pets, furniture, artwork, and food. At Chatuchuk, Bangkok's famous weekend market, thousands of vendors sell a vast variety of goods in a network of *sois* and avenues. There are also street vendors and markets in many areas of Bangkok. Chinatown is famous for its shops selling fabric, jewelry, exotic foods, and trinkets. Near Chinatown is a wonderful night flower market with streets and alleys lined with colorful flowers. Narayana Phand near the Central World Plaza is a large

government-run store that sells a wide variety of Thai handicrafts from every region of the country: though the higher floors have set-prices, the basement has a market-environment.

Merchandise

Stores in Bangkok sell international merchandise, including ethnic foods and imported food products. Produce is plentiful and can be found at grocery stores and fresh markets. Pesticide use is common, so care should be taken in washing fresh produce. Local and imported meats are sold at grocery stores.

Bookstores and newsstands in Bangkok carry English-language books, newspapers, and periodicals. Because many of these items are imported, expect the prices to be higher than in the States or other country of origin.

Most department stores and clothing shops carry clothing sizes appropriate for the Thai market: men and women tend to be shorter and thinner than Americans and other Westerners. Men taller than 5' 10" or six feet will likely find it difficult to buy clothes, especially pants or suits, at department stores. Tall women or those who wear over size 8 or 10 will also find buying readymade clothes challenging. Western clothing brands and imported designer boutiques are more likely to have Western sizes, yet prices are usually from 30 to 50 percent higher than the same product in the United States. Even so, there is likely to be a smaller supply of the larger Western sizes, making them hard to locate. Larger shoe sizes may also be difficult to locate. On the other hand, department stores and markets typically have wide selections of stylish clothing for children and teenagers. Custom-made clothing is an affordable option in Bangkok.

Dealing with Sales Personnel

The level of service in Thailand is remarkable; the idea of customer service goes far beyond the expectations of the average American. At many department stores, sales personnel are plentiful and knowledgeable. However, at times, the desire to inform the customer and demonstrate how each product is used can slow the pace of shopping substantially. Product recommendations may have more to do with brand-status than quality. Even though larger department stores such as Central and Emporium are well stocked and can provide assistance to customers, it is not always easy to find what you would imagine to be a common product. Bringing a sample or picture of the item to the store can be a good way to find the product.

TRANSPORTATION

For decades, Bangkok has been infamous for its traffic jams. Cars, buses, taxis, motorcycles, and three-wheeled tuk-tuks fill the streets. The noise, exhaust fumes, precarious sidewalks, and inclement weather make a pedestrian's life quite difficult. Traffic jams (*rot tit*) are expected and unavoidable in the long rush hour periods in the morning and evening. Recently, Bangkok has made tremendous strides in addressing its

transportation issues by expanding the modes of transportation available. In 1999 the Bangkok Metropolitan Authority opened the sky-train system. An underground subway system opened in the spring of 2004.

Public Transportation

BTS Sky Train

An efficient mode of transportation in Bangkok is the Bangkok Mass Transit System (BTS) Sky Train, which has aided traffic flow since 1999. This quick, clean, reliable elevated system connects major tourist and commercial areas on two lines through the city. Tickets cost from 10 to 40 baht depending on distance, and can be paid with individual trip tickets or with a pre-paid BTS pass. In 2000, the Cabinet approved three additional BTS routes. Further expansion plans into suburban areas are being discussed.

The Metro

The Bangkok Metro subway opened in the Spring 2004. The Metro connects with some BTS stations and serves additional areas that are not near the existing BTS Sky Train. While still limited, the metro system seems to have had a positive impact in terms of reducing traffic in certain parts of the city. There are tentative plans to expand the metro line in the next few years.

Taxis

Metered taxis are available throughout the day and night in Bangkok and are easy to find except in rush hour or the rain. Metered fares have base rates of 35 baht, which increase with time and distance. Fares are very affordable and typically range from 40 to 100 baht for Bangkok trips. Passengers must pay tolls if using the expressways. Typically, when the driver says "no meter" and quotes a set price, you should refuse or you will overpay. In parts of Bangkok and in other Thai cities and villages, taxi services using pickup trucks and other vehicles are operated.

There are thousands of motorcycle taxis in Bangkok. Though a quick alternative to sitting in a vehicle in Bangkok's gridlock, they are notoriously unsafe. It is advised to avoid using motorcycle taxis as accidents are common and those involving motorcycles can be particularly deadly. The Embassy strongly recommends that Americans refrain from riding motorcycles.

River Ferries and Water Taxis

There are several types of taxi and ferry services offered on the Chao Phraya River and Bangkok's canals: Chao Phraya Express Boats, long-tailed boats, and shuttle boats. It is best to become familiar with the piers and boat landings before boarding because boats do not stop at every pier and may not stop for more than a few seconds. Fares are

different for each type of boat and distance traveled. Most riverside hotels offer free shuttle boats across the river or to the BTS skytrain station.

Buses

The Bangkok Mass Transit Authority operates bus routes with thousands of buses and minibuses throughout Bangkok and the surrounding provinces. Routes include regular bus, expressway bus, air conditioned bus, all-night bus, *soi* minibus, and minibus. At peak traffic hours, though very crowded, major streets devote lanes to bus-only traffic and traveling by bus can be faster than driving or taking a taxi. Fares range from 3 to 18 baht for public buses. Some of Thailand's other cities also have bus systems.

Driving

Bangkok has heavy traffic – composed of motorcycles, cars, trucks, buses, and tuk-tuks. Accidents are common, and those involving motorcycles are often deadly. Congested roads and a scarcity of ambulances can make it difficult for accident victims to receive timely medical attention. Outside of Bangkok and on Bangkok's highways, fast and reckless driving is common. The fatalist attitude of many Thais results in many close calls and far too many serious traffic accidents each year.

Driving

Personal vehicles allow flexibility when traveling in the Bangkok area and throughout Thailand. Many people have their vehicles shipped to Thailand or purchase vehicles on arrival even though other modes of transportation, as well as rental cars, are available. At post, some people drive daily, while others may only drive their vehicles on holidays or weekend trips outside Bangkok. This depends on the individual's or family's lifestyle and level of comfort on the roadways.

Driving can be an ideal way to explore Thailand once familiar with the roads, local driving styles, and the unexpectedness of the journey. Bangkok streets present particular challenges with the variety of vehicles and people on the roadways. There are other challenges in the provinces: slow farm equipment, overloaded farm trucks, speeding buses, racing vehicles, heavy semi-trucks, and old motorcycles. The driving styles of the Thais is fatalistic: one in which anything goes and limitations do not exist in regard to height and weight of truck loads, speed (either fast or slow), age or condition of vehicles, numbers of passengers, or restraint in passing other vehicles. This is particularly obvious on roads outside Bangkok.

Thailand has an extensive network of highways and secondary roads that are in good condition. Paved roads connect Thailand's major cities, but except for the major highways, most have only two lanes. Slow-moving trucks may limit speed and visibility. Consumption of alcohol, amphetamines, and other stimulants by commercial drivers is also common. Motorists may wish to obtain accident insurance that covers medical and

liability costs. The more affluent driver, even if not at fault, is frequently compelled to cover the expenses of the other party in an accident.

Vehicles travel on the left side of the road in Thailand and vehicles are right-hand drive. Americans living in Thailand may have their left-hand drive vehicles shipped to Thailand. Difficulties driving a left-hand drive vehicle on the left side of the road are mostly limited to passing on two lane roads. Though many Japanese and European cars are sold in Thailand, some American automakers are not present in Thailand. Investigate the dealer service coverage of the make, model, and year of your car before deciding if it will be shipped to Thailand.

Under certain restrictions, American personnel may purchase vehicles in Thailand. Many makes of vehicles are available in Bangkok and there are occasionally options to purchase used vehicles from outgoing personnel. It is best to research these options before coming to post, as dealers in the United States or other countries may be able to coordinate sales and delivery before arrival. If you are considering purchasing a vehicle in Thailand, be aware that new vehicles in Thailand may be considerably more expensive than a comparable vehicle in the United States.

Motorcycles

Accidents are common, and those involving motorcycles are particularly deadly. Use of helmets is mandatory in Bangkok and other areas, but this law is seldom enforced. The Embassy strongly recommends that Americans avoid riding motorbikes, including motorcycle taxis.

Walking

Though many streets in Bangkok have sidewalks, walking can be a challenge. If the sidewalks are not buckled, crumbling, or uneven, they are likely to be filled with vendors and their wares, food stalls, and sleeping dogs. Motorcycles are driven and parked on sidewalks, and travel in all directions in traffic. The air pollution from buses, tuk-tuks, and motorcycles make walking unpleasant on busy roads. There are usually pedestrian bridges over major roadways for safety, but are not always conveniently located. Smaller streets without sidewalks can be dangerous from the vehicle, tuk-tuk, and motorcycle traffic.

On the other hand, walking on quiet sidestreets can be very pleasant and an interesting way to explore the residential areas of Bangkok. Public areas like Lumpini Park near the Embassy have walking and jogging paths for those wanting to exercise outside.

Bangkok is not handicapped-friendly. Though newer buildings are typically wheelchair-accessible, sidewalks, most BTS skytrain stations, metro trains, and buses cannot accommodate wheelchairs. Many skytrain and metro stations do not have elevators or adequate escalators, often requiring users to walk up multiple flights of stairs. Individuals

not able to navigate stairs and uneven sidewalks may be required to rely on taxis or personal vehicles for transportation.

SERVICES

Phone and Internet

Thailand is technically advanced, with telephone and internet easily accessible. Public phone booths are plentiful, including special phones for international phone calls. Private phones in homes and offices are the norm, and service has reasonable domestic rates but high international rates. Thailand has very high rates of mobile phone ownership, and numerous options exist for purchasing phones and service plans. Mobile phone service is affordable and tends to be cheaper than in the United States.

Internet access is readily available at coffee shops, internet cafes, and hotel business centers. There is dial-up internet access and DSL service available for home use.

Hair and Beauty Salons

Like most services in Thailand, hair and beauty shops can be found in all ranges of price, services offered, and quality. Hotels, department stores, and shopping malls typically have beauty shops and related services. Additionally, there are many hair and beauty salons located throughout the city and can be found in guidebooks, advertisements, and through personal recommendations. Services vary and may include hair styling, facials, waxing, manicures, pedicures, and sometimes massage.

Tailors and Dressmakers

Many people in Bangkok use tailors for custom-made slacks, jackets, suits, shirts, skirts, and dresses. This is a particularly good option for Westerners who have difficulties shopping for ready-made clothing in Thailand. Personal recommendations are the best way to find the tailor that is right for your needs.

HOTELS

Visitors to Thailand have many choices for accommodations. Thailand is home to some of the top luxury hotels in the world. Moderate and budget accommodations are also plentiful. Most provincial capitals have higher end moderate hotels in addition to small budget hotels and inns. There are many guesthouses in Bangkok and in other popular tourist destinations.

Hotels in Thailand also have a social role. Most luxury and moderate hotels have restaurants and large meeting rooms, and many of Bangkok's most popular restaurants are in hotels. Special dinners, celebrations, meetings, and other occasions in the middle- and upper-class often take place at these restaurants. Hotels are often the site of wedding parties, receptions, and holiday celebrations.

TRAVEL IN AND OUTSIDE OF THE COUNTRY

The efficient transportation infrastructure in Thailand makes domestic travel easy. Rates for domestic air, train, and bus travel are cheaper than comparable services in the United States. Airports are located throughout the country, serving large and medium-sized towns. Thai Airways is the largest airline in Thailand. This government-owned airline serves domestic and international markets, but there are also several smaller private airlines that serve many of the same markets. Airline reservations can be made on-line, through travel agents, or with the airlines directly. Airfare is price competitive and new regional airlines serving domestic and international destinations were introduced in 2003.

The Bangkok International Airport is well connected: over 80 airlines serve hundreds of international destinations. A new modern international airport will open in 2005 to replace the older airport at Don Muang. At the opening, the new airport is expected to be the largest and most technically advanced airport in the world.

The State Railway of Thailand operates more than 4,500 kilometers of rail that cover four routes in Thailand: northern, northeastern, southern, and eastern. Additional side routes are also offered. Long-distance and overnight routes offer food service and sleeper cars. There are various classes of tickets and types of trains that determine the speed, comfort, and price of the trip. Because there are several Bangkok train stations, verify the departure station before purchasing tickets. Though the train system is quite reliable and safe, travel by train is considerably slower than traveling by air and, depending on the route, can be slower than driving or taking the bus. Thailand is connected by rail to Singapore and the Malaysian peninsula.

Buses serve urban and rural areas throughout the entire country. In addition to the government-operated bus line, Baw Khaw Saw, there are privately operated bus lines and tour companies. There are various types of buses including VIP, Super VIP, tour, air conditioned, and regular. Become familiar with these choices before buying a ticket. Though all options are extremely affordable, the condition and safety record of some private companies is substandard. Be aware that bus drivers are notorious for their fast and sometimes reckless driving. There have been serious, even fatal, bus crashes involving foreign passengers on long bus trips.

Service on the government air-conditioned buses is usually good and is safer and much more reliable than private tour buses. Buses operating from hotels or tourist areas instead of government bus terminals may offer poor and unpredictable service. Book tickets through the government bus terminal instead of an unfamiliar travel agency to ensure you receive the service you purchased.

PUBLIC HEALTH

Sanitation and Cleanliness

Thailand is a service-oriented society and labor prices are relatively low. Sidewalks and streets are frequently swept, floors mopped, and windows washed. Restaurants tend to be clean, and because the Thai government has conducted education campaigns promoting food sanitation, care is usually taken regarding sanitation and hygiene in the kitchen. The level of sanitation may vary in provincial restaurants and with street vendors regarding food storage, preparation, and cooking. Food-borne diseases and food poisoning are still common in Thailand, and diners should always be conscious of this.

Health Services

Medical treatment in Thailand is good. This is particularly true in Bangkok, where excellent facilities exist for routine, long-term, and emergency health care. Recently, Bangkok has become a popular destination for health tourism, in which residents from other countries travel to Bangkok to receive medical care. Advanced medical care is available at private and government hospitals throughout the country. Prior to arriving at post, determine if your health insurance will be accepted at the major Bangkok hospitals or if you will be able to submit claims from Bangkok.

Recent political goals have centered on the accessibility and affordability of healthcare for Thais. By lowering the price of hospital care, more Thais are receiving medical treatment. Almost every province has hospitals and clinics, either public or private. Though the level of care that can be provided may be limited, while traveling in Thailand you will never be very far from safe medical care.

Actually reaching that care may be difficult. Ambulance services are mostly operated by specific hospitals rather than a city- or district-wide service. In Bangkok, heavy traffic can mean a timely wait for an ambulance. If possible, it is recommended to take a taxi to the nearest or preferred hospital instead of waiting for an ambulance.

Numerous diseases are common in Thailand and you will likely receive immunizations and vaccines before coming to post. In particular, mosquito-borne diseases such as dengue fever are common, though malaria is limited to only a few rural locations. Rabies infections are a reality because of the number of stray animals in urban areas, and pedestrians should be aware of the risk. Food-borne diseases are common, and care should be taken when selecting restaurants and other food vendors.

Thailand has experienced an epidemic of HIV and AIDS infection. Heterosexual transmission accounts for most HIV infections, and HIV infection is common among prostitutes of both sexes. For almost 20 years, educational campaigns, especially by the Thai-based Population and Community Development Association, have been crucial in reducing the rate of new infections.

Additionally, there are health risks from alcoholic beverages, medications, and drugs that may be more potent or a different composition than those sold in the United States. Several U.S. citizen tourists die in Thailand each year of apparent premature heart attacks after drinking alcohol or using drugs. The current administration and law enforcement

officials do not tolerate drug use. A 2003 campaign against drug production, distribution, and use demonstrated the government's action against the drug problem.

Thailand has not experienced recent major medical emergencies. Currently, the avian flu situation is still under immense scrutiny in Thailand. It is not known what extent the disease will have on the human population though there have been several human deaths attributed to avian flu. The 2003 Asian SARS epidemic mostly avoided Thailand, though several cases were reported.

WORK

Cultural view of work

Sanuk, or fun, does not escape the Thai's view of work. The word *ngaan* in Thai means both work and party, and symbolizes the connection between the two subjects. For some Thais, *sanuk* is so important that if work is not fun, they may quickly become discontent and may start looking for another job. If a *farang* manager is not aware of the need for fun and socializing, productivity and employee retention may soon become issues.

Spousal employment

Like in the United States, two-income households are common in Thailand. It is acceptable and commonplace that a wife and/or mother hold a job. For Americans in Thailand, however, employment options for family members of Embassy employees are limited. Because employment options may exist at the Embassy or related U.S. agencies, it is recommended that family members contact the Community Liaison Office (CLO) prior to or upon arrival at post. More information can be found by contacting the various international schools, friends, sponsors, charitable organizations, and non-governmental organizations (NGO).

Employment opportunities for family members on the Thai economy are limited. Work permit regulations, local wage scales, and Thai language requirements can be major constraints. Most employed spouses work either directly or indirectly in U.S. government-related activities. The large number of adult family members at post compared with the relatively small number of jobs available makes the job search competitive. Most available jobs at the Embassy are in support roles such as the clerical and secretarial fields; some jobs are full-time positions while others are part-time. There are approximately 60 positions at the mission, but this varies considerably in part due to budget constraints. The Embassy's Regional Human Resources Office advertises job openings for the Embassy and related agencies in the weekly CLO newsletter.

Thai labor laws restrict the availability of jobs on the economy available to foreigners, and the Thai government produces a list of professions limited to Thai nationals. Even withstanding the difficulties, some dependents have found jobs working with other foreign or international agencies such as the United Nations. In recent years, family members have been employed in teaching positions in Bangkok at the international

schools, private Thai schools, the American University Alumni Association, and local nursery schools. On occasion, spouses have been hired to teach specialized subjects at universities. Others have successfully chosen to pursue self-employment in photography, music, aerobic and dance instruction, writing, and tutoring.

Volunteer service opportunities within the community exist with many organizations and groups, including orphanages; National Museum Volunteers group at the National Museum in Bangkok; the American Women's Club; and the Bangkok Community Theatre, bands, and other musical groups; as well as the CLO, YMCA, YWCA, local churches, schools, hospitals, and many Thai charitable organizations.

In the past, the Embassy has a ten-week summer-hire program for students over 16 years and older. Each summer about 50 high school and college students have the opportunity to work with various U.S. agencies at the Embassy. Continuation of this program is subject to current year funding.

CRISIS SITUATIONS

Political Climate

Seeking refuge during crises

Throughout the 20th century, there were periods of political unrest and relatively peaceful coups, followed by a time of military control and appointed governments. The most unforgettable of these times were the student protests in Bangkok in 1973, 1976, and 1992. Political refugees from neighboring countries came to Thailand in the 20th century to escape turmoil and governments in their home countries. There is still some movement of Burmese people crossing the borders in northern Thailand seeking refuge from political and economic conditions.

Use of bribes and rewards

In past decades, bribery was widespread in many government offices. Today, the prevalence of bribery with law enforcement and government officials has declined, and though bribery can still be seen in some situations, it is not rampant.

THEFT AND CRIME

Thailand and Bangkok have low crime rates, and the crime threat in Bangkok remains less than in many American cities. In recent years, crimes of opportunity common in large cities, such as pickpocketing, purse-snatching, and burglaries, have become more frequent though trends are typically cyclical in response to the economic conditions. Travelers should be especially wary when walking in crowded markets, tourist sites, and bus or train stations. Violent crimes against foreigners are uncommon, and women are generally not subject to sexual harassment. Travelers should always use official metered taxis in Bangkok and never enter a cab that has anyone besides a driver in it.

Reports of serious transportation-related crimes involving taxis and tuk-tuks are uncommon, though fare scams do occur. Other scams involving gems, city tours, entertainment venues, and credit cards are more common, especially in areas heavily visited by tourists. Credit cards should be used only in reputable, established businesses, and the amount charged should be checked for accuracy. Travelers should not accept tours or offers from solicitors on the streets. Shopping at lesser-known gem stores carries a serious risk; the Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT) receives over 1,000 complaints each year from visitors who have been cheated on gem purchases because the gems turn out to be overpriced and guarantees are not honored. Bars or entertainment venues in tourist areas may try to charge exorbitant fees for drinks or unadvertised cover charges. Victims of such scams should immediately contact the nearest branch of the Tourist Police for help with restitution and should not attempt to resolve the situation alone.

More seriously, there are occasional reports of druggings perpetrated by prostitutes or unscrupulous bar workers for the purpose of robbery. Tourists have also been victimized by drugged food and drink, usually offered by a friendly stranger (sometimes posing as a tourist). Travelers are advised to avoid leaving drinks or food unattended and should avoid going to unfamiliar venues alone.

FIRE

In the past, there were few regulations regarding fire safety and protection, but many new residential and office buildings in Bangkok are well equipped with modern fire protection technology. Older buildings have varying degrees of protection such as sprinkler systems, fire escapes, emergency lighting, smoke detectors, and fire extinguishers. Embassy staff annually inspect smoke detectors and fire extinguishers that have been installed in Embassy housing. There are fire protection services in Bangkok, but the crowded city streets and traffic jams may lengthen the time required to reach a fire, thus increasing the risk of damage and injury. The emergency Fire Brigade number in Bangkok is 199.

CAR ACCIDENTS

Thailand has a high vehicle accident rate, and is the leading cause of death in the 1- to 14-year age group worldwide. Most traffic deaths and accidents in Thailand are motorcycle related. The use of child restraint devices such as car seats for children and infants is rare, even in Bangkok. Being familiar with the roads and the route will help limit the risk of accidents when driving. Drivers must always be alert because of the numbers of motorcycles and other vehicles on the road. The fatalistic attitude of many Thai drivers translates into high speeds and reckless driving. Around Thai holidays, the addition of alcohol into this mix makes roads more dangerous. The Regional Security Officer will review accident procedures during the newcomer's orientation at the Embassy.

GLOSSARY OF FOREIGN WORDS

Farang—Thai term for foreigner, particularly Westerners

Klong—Canal

Krung thep—Thai word for “Bangkok”

Isaan—Northeastern region of Thailand

Mai pen rai—Never mind. It doesn’t matter. You’re welcome, etc.

Songkran—The April Buddha-cleaning and water festival celebrating the Thai New Year

Wai—Nonverbal greeting and a sign of respect made by placing both hands together at chest level, palms touching, and fingers pointing up while bowing the head; also symbolizes much about the Thai social system by being a display of status and rank. The social inferior will always take a physically inferior position by bending the head lower and raising the hands higher, which immediately identifies the person with the higher rank. Also used for objects such as Buddha images and sacred places, and serves as a gesture of thanks.

Wat—Thai word for “temple”

SUGGESTED READINGS AND RESOURCES

- *Background Notes: Thailand*, Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs, Department of State. <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/2814.htm>
- *Bangkok Guide*, Australian-New Zealand Women’s Group. (Published biannually. Sold at the Embassy and most Bangkok bookstores.)
- *CIA: World Factbook Thailand*, U.S. Central Intelligence Agency. <http://www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/geos/th.html>
- *Culture Shock: Thailand*, Robert and Nanthapa Cooper. Graphic Arts Center Publishing Co.
- *Thailand: A Country Study*, Library of Congress. <http://lcweb2.loc.gov/frd/cs/thtoc.html>
- *Thailand Post Report*. U.S. Department of State. http://foia.state.gov/MMS/postrpt/pr_view_start.asp
- *Travel Warnings & Consular Information Sheets*, U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Consular Affairs American Citizen Services. [http://travel.state.gov/travel_warnings.html]
- *U.S. Consulate General Chiang Mai*, U.S. Department of State. <http://usa.or.th/consulcm/consulcm.htm>
- *U.S. Embassy Bangkok*, U.S. Department of State. [<http://bangkok.usembassy.gov/>]

- *Working with Thais: A Guide to Managing in Thailand.* Holmes, Henry and Suchada Tangtongyavy. White Lotus Press, 2000.